

Leon Shellswick Jr.

Born:

Died:

Period of Service

Sources:



VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
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Interview with
Leon Shellswick

Conducted by John Gay

October 2, 2015

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Leon Shellswick is here at his home on Washington Island and we're going to interview him about his experience in the service. Leon, why don't you tell us what you were doing before you went into the service, how old you were and we'll go from there.

I graduated from college.

What college was that?

This is Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Arkansas. I actually started college in Chicago, at Wilson Junior College. I went through a half a year and I finished up when my football buddies came back from Arkansas they said, "You gotta come down there with us." So, I did.

What year was that, Leon?

That would have been '59, no. For school?

When you were just going into school.

Okay, that would be... I graduated in '59. [I graduated from high school in 1950. I graduated Arkansas State in June 1954 and went immediately into the Army.]

Okay. Close enough.

I got drafted after my graduation from college, my mother met me downtown Chicago at the train station and she said, "Here's a bag of your clothes; here's your induction papers; you're on your way to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas; you're in the Army."

I know all about that place; that's where I went.

I didn't even get a chance to get home. I had to catch the next train south to Camp Chaffee. I took my basic training at Camp Chaffee and then I was transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia. What did I do there? I was in the Signal Corps. [In Fort Benning I went to Wheel Vehicle Mechanic School.]

Another eight weeks, was it then?

Eight weeks training and transferred to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Knew nothing about the Signal Corps. A First Lieutenant came by and I was a Private, and he says, "Leon, Leon Shellswick, we went to school together."

Where, in Arkansas, in Chicago or up here on the Island?

In Arkansas.

Oh, really?

Yeah. So, he said, "I got a good job for you." It was in 93rd Signal Battalion Headquarters Company. I was Assistant Personnel Sergeant at that time. That was the title I was given; I was Spec 3.

Oh, wow?

That was, I guess, the title because I had the college training.

They figured, you could read...

I had a good job, in other words.

That was great!

and not in the trenches. I spent the rest of my tour at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. I traveled the State of Arizona. Oh, that's another thing. My Dad, in Chicago, was a friend of a car dealer and I called Dad. I said, "Dad, I'm at Fort Huachuca; we're in the boonies; there is absolutely nothing to do." I said, "I gotta see if I can get a car so I can see Arizona." So, he talked to his friend at the car dealership and at Christmas time, I went home and they had a 1953 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible [for me.]

Oh, wow.

Leather seats.

This was '55, '55, '56?

[That was 1955.] This was a '53 convertible, beautiful car. I spent Christmas in Chicago, went back to Arizona, and being at Headquarters Company, I had many weekends off and we traveled every corner of Arizona.

Terrific. Let me ask you, where is Fort Huachuca? Is that right down near the border?

That's right close to the border. That's below Tucson. What did they used to call it, Fry or something like that? Apache Junction? [was close...a few miles away.]

How big is Fort Huachuca? Is that a pretty big space?

It was a big space but it was a small camp. Being in Headquarters Company, I did have many opportunities and some of the opportunities were that they would wake me up at three o'clock in the morning saying that so and so and so and so was in jail and

You had to process all the AWOL's and drunks?

I had to go get them out of the brig.

Is that right? Oh, wow. Was there a town nearby Fort Huachuca?

Yeah.

That's where they got hammered there?

So, you're right on the border a little west of Nogales?

Right. Being in Headquarters Company, I would have charge of the quarters. Or somebody would come in and say, "Sergeant so and so had one too many drinks up in Bisbee," so being that Leon had this nice Chevrolet convertible, I would have to get up, get dressed and go bail him out.

So you drove up the highway to ? You left the fort?

I left the fort. I had to drive to the town where he was.

I would think the MP's would have to do that.

Well, they probably should have but then he would be in trouble.

So you're getting a guy out on a friendly basis?

Yeah, I'm getting him out without him getting in trouble.

If he was an E3 or something like that, the MP's would have gone after him maybe? As a sergeant, you had to go up there.

Some of our Master Sergeants were just back from Korea and they had a drinking problem. So we took care of them. They had good experience and we had to take care of them.

What was Fort Huachuca for?

Signal Corps.

Signal Corps.

That was all Signal Corps.

How many personnel were there? Do you have any idea? Because you wouldn't think that Signal Corps would have that many personnel but they must have had plenty of them, huh?

Yes. [But I don't know how many.]

Did you have to do a lot of paperwork in the office? Is that what you had to do?

Well, it was a battalion and we had all the companies' rosters. They would have, what did they call it in the morning when they had the...?

Reveille

Reveille and how everybody was accounted for and all that. And then they had to report that in to Battalion Headquarters so everybody was accounted for.

So you kept that every day then?

All the records.

Okay. Did you have a lot of people cycling in and out? Troops coming in and going all the time?

Yes. This was the end of Korea so there were a lot of soldiers coming in and getting discharged.

Were you down there for two years, Leon?

Not quite.

But you had a two year term?

Yes. Two years.

At Fort Benning, you were placed in the Signal Corps there? Is that where the second eight took place?

[No, at Fort Benning I was in Wheel Vehicle Mechanic training.]

Is that part of the Infantry down there?

Yeah. Why I was sent from Fort Benning to Fort Huachuca I have no idea but there was three of us. Yeah, three out of the whole Fort Benning group that went to Fort Huachuca. Everybody went around, "Where the heck is Fort Huachuca?" The three of us were from Chicago so we took a plane from Fort Benning to Chicago. We had a maybe a five-day pass or something like that to visit our folks.

Your parents were in Chicago at that time?

Parents were in Chicago. Then we got on another plane and flew to Tucson. We got to Tucson. And I mean we were buck Privates at that time and they called for transportation from Tucson to Fort Huachuca and they sent an airplane up to Tucson to pick us up, see. And this, I don't know what he was, but he got out and he looked at the three buck Privates and said "I'm supposed to be flying you down".(laughter)

You were important buck Privates, huh?

He was a little upset about that but there were no busses; we got in there too late for any kind of a bus. But to be on time they took us down. There was a Staff car waiting for us at Fort Huachuca to take us to our barracks.

What did the Signal Corps have to do? What were you commissioned to take care?

Well, you see, I was in personnel so I really never got into the Signal Corps end of it. I mean, it was cryptography; it was a lot of secret stuff that I never knew; it was all code.

Now is that part of communications? Did they.. because I remember I was talking with one guy and he said that he was in field communications which meant that he had to go up near the front and tell them where to fire the mortar shells hoping that they would shoot over him and not under him.

Wow.

But that wasn't, was that part of the Signal Corps?

No, I don't think so.

In Signal Corps you handled messages and....

Radio, radio, cryptography, even some semaphore. [There may have been some training in that.]

My father-in-law had trouble, he was a great reader but he had trouble with coming up with certain words. He used to say he was talking about a situation where the sailors were waving their metaphors.

My Army experience was a vacation. I shouldn't say. It was fantastic. Being in Arizona having a car.

The weather was always great.

Having three day weekends pretty near every other week.

Did the other two guys who went down with you, did they have similar deals or were they out in the field?

Well, they were, yeah, if we were at Headquarters Company, I'm trying to remember. At Headquarters Company we had the Supply Sergeant and all of this, troops that worked in the Supply Room and all that. That's a long time ago.

What year was this that you were down there? Early sixties was it?

Well, let's see. I graduated from High School in '50, went to college in '54.

No, no, no. You graduated from High School '59. Is that right?

No.

Betty: I graduated from High School in '55 you must have graduated in '49.

Yes.

Well, that would be more like it.

Okay. I guess I was drafted in '56.

That's more like it because I was drafted in '54. You went in in Chicago, that was at 615 West Van Buren. That big place. Oh, what a place that was. I remember some vivid things there that were kind of daunting when I was contemplating my next two years in the Army.

There was a guy. I was sent to serology where they were taking blood samples and one of the guys came through and said, "You can take all the blood you want, I got plenty." He was all full of bologna. They took a sample and he went out into the hall for the next station and collapsed on the floor. And the next guy, we were so intimidated, the next guy through the line saw him lying on the floor and he lay down next to him. Pretty soon there were about five guys, like a daisy chain. The guy at the next station was a cranky old guy. He came out of his office, "What in the hell's going on out there?" Those people jumped up.

When I was giving blood there was a guy behind me and he was looking over my shoulder and the guy jabbed the needle in and there's a little blood coming out and that guy, he went down.

I remember the hearing test. I went around the corner coming down the next aisle, there was an open door there as I walked past it because I didn't see anybody. He says, "How's your hearing?" I turned, I said, "What?" He said, "It's Okay." Yeah, those were funny days.

You were in Camp Chaffee during the winter were you?

Yeah.

You said January or something like that.

Yeah, it was cold. One experience I had there that wasn't very nice. What did they call them? Recoilless rifles, Bazookas. Well, you're on the line, the firing line, you know. In those days, I don't know if it's still the same way, there's always your partner was behind that had to wire up the Bazooka. Then there's the guy, "Ready on the right, ready on the left, ready on the firing range." So, I'm all ready and I boom and the wires came back somehow and cut me across the forehead. I don't know how that happened if it was faulty ammunition or what. They cut me and

so I had to go to the Medics and it wasn't bad at all, just a little blood but anything to get off the firing range.

Yeah, sure. They didn't give you a purple heart for that, though.

They patched me up and sent me back to my unit. Well, my unit now already had a little bit of training as to what to do with hand grenades. So I jumped in the fox hole with my buddy and I said, "What the hell do you do?" He said, "Well, you pull the pin and you let go of the handle and you lob it." That's the instruction I got because the handle flew off and then you lobbed the grenade into a pit.

Using live ammunition, were they? They were blowing up.

Yeah, they were blowing up. But that was my instruction. You pull the pin, you let the handle go and you lob it.

Get rid of the thing. I can believe that. Now you were slogging through that Arkansas clay then in the middle of winter. I can remember that, walking in that stuff. You get it up to the top of your boots and you could hardly get your feet out of the muck.

You know what I remember is not so much that. What do you call it when they're firing the machine guns over your head and you're crawling.

The obstacle course.

The obstacle course, yeah. You got your M-1 and you're going like this on your belly snaking underneath the wires and you're seeing these red things going over your head, live ammunition.

We thought it was live, yeah.

I don't know if it was cold or what but I got through that as fast as I could.

They were asking for volunteers for blood donations and I'd given blood when I was in college because we got two bits apiece for it so I volunteered. They said, "After you give blood you'll have the rest of the day off." So I said, "Fine." I volunteered along with a few other guys. They took a pint of blood and then they said, "Get back in your uniform, you're out on maneuvers." All they did was give us a glass of orange juice and sent you on your way. I thought, "I'm not going to believe these guys again." Volunteer indeed.

After you got out of basic, that would be in January of '57, do you think? You were drafted in '56.

No. I got to go home, believe it or not, for Christmas, December of '56, I got to go home

You must have been drafted in the fall, maybe?

Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm getting all screwed up. I'm thinking of my first Christmas from Arizona.

Coming back from that?

Yeah. When I got out to Arizona and my first Christmas.

Did you fly back from Fort Huachuca to Chicago?

Believe it or not, I think my Dad and Mother drove out there and picked me up from Chicago and we drove back. That's when he said, "I've got this '53 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible." He says, "You can take it back."

That's great, then you had a car down there.

So then I had a car down there in Arizona and I travelled that state.

You got up to ...

Grand Canyon. Being a convertible, I'll never forget this, being a Northern kid. I was driving, two guys in the front, two guys in the back seat, tooling along all the way from Southern Arizona all the way to Northern Arizona. When we were, "Oh, boy, we're getting a little sun burn." Well, we stopped at a drug store and this lady chewed my ass for being such a, she called me anything, for getting such a sunburn. She said, "You are going to suffer for what you've got there." She was right but she gave us, not gave us, we paid for it, a lot of salve and that night, boy, I'll tell you, we caked it on.

I got sunburned when I was down there, too. This was after Basic. I was sent from Fort Chaffee to Fort Sam Houston for the Medics and then they asked you where you wanted to go. I'd hitch-hiked through Europe after school so I thought they're going to send me to Korea so I'll volunteer to go to Japan because I knew a girl from school whose father had been ambassador to Australia from Japan. She was a nice kid and I thought we'd meet up and I'd see something of Japan. Of course, they didn't want me to go to Japan so they sent me back to Arkansas. I spent my whole time at Fort Chaffee.

I'll be darned.

Yeah, that was a joyful trip down in the mountains there, Boston Mountains, that was something. Arkansas can be kind of tough. When we got off the train from Chicago, it was at night and they drove us from Fort Smith Arkansas up to the, they had the half tracks and took us up to the camp which was about fifteen miles from Fort Smith. We were sitting out there, outside of barracks, and this RA guy was going to give us some insight into what was going to happen. I don't think anybody understood what the heck he was talking about. He was so South that we couldn't understand what the language was. So, you didn't have to leave the States in order to learn a foreign language.

What did you see in Arizona? Did you get up to the North there where Highway 66 goes through?

Yes. We traveled the Grand Canyon. We went all over Arizona.

You had to put a lot of miles on it because Arizona's a big state.

Yes. On weekends when we couldn't be traveling, we went up into the mountains above Huachuca and panned for gold.

Did you really?

Just for the hell of it. Never did find any. We had fun. One of these pigs, Javelina, is that it?

Javelina, they're wild pigs like Razor Backs in Arkansas.

Wild pigs, yeah. Gil Sullivan, Jewish boy from New Jersey, city boy, real city boy. We rented horses to go up into the Huachuca Mountains. Going up the trail wasn't bad at all. We'd stop and there were streams there and we'd water the horses. Well, on the way down, the horse knows he's going to the barn and his horse took off and he dropped the reins and grabbed onto the pommel and he's screaming bloody murder. I'm racing to grab the reins of his horse and stop him. I finally did but oh, man!

Thought he was going to die, huh?

Yeah. Jewish boy, Gil Sullivan, I'll never forget him.

You made a lot of friends in the Army because you were in with them all day and all night and you had to get along with them. Did you ever get in touch with any of the guys afterwards? Everybody got separated?

Yeah. They went. I don't know where they went. There was two boys from New Jersey. David Littlestone, he was half Indian. I guess, Littlestone? And Gil Sullivan. Never kept in touch with them.

But altogether, you had a good time in the service?

Oh yeah, yeah. It was a holiday for me.

You got out in what year, do you think? Do you remember? You got out in maybe '58?

Out in December '56.

And then you came back to where, Chicago?

[No, I went to Washington Island until December 1958.]

He was a carpenter, was he at that time?

Yeah. He said, "Jim Fry's son works for the Youngstown Sheet and Tool Company," in East Chicago, Indiana, steel mills. He said, "He can get you in right away in the Metallurgy Department." Then, you know, it'd be a job and you could learn working. I did that but it was swing shift.

Eleven to seven?

Well all. There were three shifts. So, I did that.

You had to travel from the South Side of Chicago all the way over to East Lansing.

Well, the South Side of Chicago, I lived at 6700 South. Where did I have to go, 149th?

149th.

Something like that.

Did you know Betty before this? From the Island? How did you wind up with Betty and get married then?

I met Betty right out there on the ice.

Oh, is that right? Detroit Harbor ice.

Yeah.

Now what year was that?

Wait 'til she walks back.

I'll bet Betty remembers.

Hey, Betty.

Betty: '57.

'57

'57

Alright, there you are. So, your heritage is from the Island but you actually had been down in Chicago all that time.

See, my Dad was born on the Island.

Now he and Al were the two boys?

There are three boys. John was the youngest, Al was the oldest, my Dad was the middle and John was the youngest. John went...

He was in service, wasn't he?

Yeah.

I think it's right here.

I don't think Al was and I don't think my Dad was.

Neither of them were but John was. I got Corporal Alfred Shellswick, World War I.

Oh.

And then John, World War I, was also. He was in France. Now you wound up in Racine didn't you or Kenosha working?

Yeah, okay, now how did I get to Racine?

How long did the job at the steel mills last? Was that just a short time?

Yeah. This was a time when there were many, many strikes.

You tried to work and then you were out on strike is that it?

Yeah.

Had to join the union?

I didn't; I was a scab; I had to walk through all the lines. Same way with the J.I. Case. I was office personnel.

After the steel mill, you started working for J.I. Case?

Yeah.

Now that was up here in Racine, wasn't it?

Racine, yeah. Did you move up here? You married Betty where?

I married her here. Yeah, we lived in Racine for a while. I wasn't married to her when I was working at the steel mills.

When did you get married, in '59?

Yeah. '60.

'60? So by then you were working up in Racine maybe. How did you get the job at J. I. Case? Did you go out looking for it? See something?

Oh, it's coming back. Betty was teaching school in Racine and so I went up to see her from Chicago, up to Racine.

Did you still have the convertible?

I don't know, probably. And I took her out to lunch and I was driving from her school and I drove straight into the Case Company property. They said, "Hiring." Well, I've got nothing to do so I walked in there, introduced myself and the personnel manager said, "You're just the guy I'm looking for."

Oh really?

I said, "Oh." He said the engineering department, they said they're looking for a cross between an accountant and an engineer. And I said, "Well, I could be a Jewish Engineer." I have a college education in accounting and all that. I don't know nothing about engineering but I could fake it. I went out there and it was not engineering. Well, it was engineering but it was engineering, drawing, specifications, bills of material. They were doing everything long hand, long books. It was my job to get it all computerized, into the computer. I didn't know what a computer was.

They were pretty new.

But I always said this. I knew people. I had four topnotch people. They were purchasing, manufacturing, production control and we all worked together and we computerized their billing material but it was computerized in such a fashion that purchasing, manufacturing, everybody could use this billing material. They could ask for the different forms that would benefit purchasing, you know.

Did you have to make forms up too or did you just transcribe everything that was there and just get it on ...?

Oh, no. We transcribed everything into the computer and then we went from a form that long into a form that long or into the computer. Really you got out of the computer what you wanted and you printed your sheet.

How long were you in that job then?

Thirty-three years.

Thirty-three years. Did you stay in that department?

Yes and no. Did I stay in that building? No. They tore that building down and we moved but more or less in that capacity.

Thirty-three years. So when did you retire then?

I don't know.

That was in the nineties, upper nineties. Did you move right up to the Island then? Oh, no, she was still teaching in Racine.

Hey Betty, when did I retire.

Betty: I think '94.

Yes, I think you're right, '94.

And you were still teaching then?

Betty: Yes, I taught until 2000.

Then you came up here full time? Great. That's when Leon planted the tomatoes?

Betty: Yes, that's when the work started, you're right. Got out of school on the twelfth and he said the van will be here on the fifteenth. I had three days anyway. Maybe I got out of school on the eighth. I said, "I've got to spend some time in Racine." He said, "No, you don't."

I wish you were here. I'm forgetting half this stuff.

Betty: No, you're doing fine. It's your interview not mine.

So, all in all, the military experience was a pretty good one for you.

Oh, yes, it was very good.

You put a lot of miles on the carein Arizona, didn't you? I did, too. We went from Fort Chaffee, it was Camp Chaffee at that time. We hired out a little place in Mountainburg, Arkansas which was above Fort Smith by about ...

Mountainview?

No, it was Mountainburg. The Boston Mountains of the Ozarks were the biggest part of the Ozarks and down in a valley between two of those humps was Mountainburg. And it was remote. I mean they had the American Legion dance on Saturday night and you could buy White Lightening off a stump for two dollars. You just put the two dollars down and the guy would come back in ten minutes. They had a square dance there every Saturday night

and it was pretty remote. It was fun. We'd go up there on a weekend. Because I was in a Medical Unit, the guys in the butcher shop and the cooks would bring me stuff so they could get out of T.I. & E. So we went up there on the weekend and we would have all kinds of good chow and sit around and drink beer and fish in the little creek and get nothing for our effort but it was fun.

Betty: I take it the White Lightening was Moonshine?

Oh, yeah it was.

They were suspicious of us for a while, the locals but when they found out that we were just renting out that cottage, it was a house actually. You had to drive through a creek to get to it when the creek was low. If the creek was high you had to park it there and then either or wade across or else, if it was really high, you had to come in from a different spot, about four miles round trip to get in the back way coming through a trail in the mountains. It was remote.

Betty: Were you in during peace time or were you in...?

I was in right at the end of the Korean War.

Betty: How old are you, John?

In two weeks, I'll be eighty-five.

Betty: Oh, my goodness.

An old guy. The nice thing about getting old is more and more girls look young.

All laugh.

This has been fun. Leon, I appreciate you talking with us. I'm going to end this. We are in Leon Shellswick's home on Detroit Harbor on Washington Island, Wisconsin on September 11th, 2015 and thanks Leon for spending time with us.